

The Apocalypse of Shenute

Unknown author

DATE OF BIRTH 7th c.

PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown, presumably Egypt

DATE OF DEATH After c. 695

PLACE OF DEATH Unknown, presumably Egypt, possibly at the Monastery of St Shenute (the 'White Monastery')

BIOGRAPHY

Nothing is known of the author of a pseudonymous apocalyptic text beyond what can be gathered from the text itself.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary —

Secondary —

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

No original title. Modern titles: 'The Apocalypse of Shenute', 'The Apocalypse in the Arabic life of Shenute', 'The first (Arabic) Apocalypse of Shenute', 'The Prophecy of Christ to Shenute', 'The Vision of Ps.-Shenute', 'ApocShen I'

DATE Approximately 695

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Coptic or Greek

DESCRIPTION

This short historical apocalypse is preserved as part of an Arabic and an Ethiopic version of the *Life of Shenute*, and consists of a prophecy of Christ to this Coptic saint (d. 464) about the end of time. The prophecy includes references to the Sasanian occupation of Egypt (619-29), the rule of Cyrus al-Muqawqis (631-42), and the Arab conquests. In addition, an historical passage enclosed in the Antichrist Legend – and generally unnoticed by scholars – gives a brief account

of Muslim rule, mentioning harassment of the population, the wrongful gathering of possessions, and people abandoning Christ's church owing to oppression.

The text gives the impression of having been written to counter the threat of conversion to Islam. Implicitly comparing the Muslim rulers with the Antichrist, who attempts to lead the world astray by pretending to be Christ yet who soon reveals himself to be a terrible oppressor, the text aims to stigmatize the Muslims as evil and treacherous and to deny their religious claims. At the same time, by holding up the example of 'the pure ones' who will resist the Deceiver's terror and temptations and thus earn God's eternal reward, the text encourages the believers not to abandon their faith but to endure in the face of present trials.

One of the last clearly historical allusions in the text is the statement that the Arabs will 'rebuild the Temple that is in Jerusalem,' which most probably refers to the construction of the Dome of the Rock, begun or completed in 691-92. This and the absence of any reference to the refugee problem that started to afflict Egyptian society around the turn of the century suggest that the work was written in the 690s, perhaps shortly after Governor 'Abd al-'Azīz's tax reform of 693-94 mentioned by Eutychius (*Eutychii annales*, i, p. 41), which, together with Islam's growing religious and political assertiveness, may have caused fears of a major outbreak of apostasy. It has recently been suggested that the apocalypse was written even earlier, shortly after the Arab conquest of Egypt (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 281-82), but the details of Muslim rule as well as the allusion to the Muslims' denial of Christ's crucifixion, which testifies to some knowledge of Islamic tenets, makes such an early date of composition rather doubtful.

The apocalypse was most likely composed by a Coptic miaphysite author in Shenute's 'White Monastery' in Middle Egypt. Its Arabic version shows signs of having been translated from the Coptic, which was probably also the original language of the work, although, in view of its early date of composition, one cannot exclude the possibility of a Greek original. The Ethiopic version, which is secondary to the Arabic, depends on an Arabic *Vorlage* that differs from the extant Arabic textual material. It is unclear when the prophecy was inserted into the *Life*. The apocalypse was strongly influenced by the third-century Egyptian *Apocalypse of Elijah*, and it is closely related to a passage in the *Homily on the wedding feast at Cana* attributed to Patriarch Benjamin I (r. 626-65) (Müller, *Homilie über die Hochzeit zu Kana*, pp. 232-35).

While it is the oldest known Coptic miaphysite apocalypse from the Islamic period, the work has hardly left a trace in later Coptic apocalyptic literature.

SIGNIFICANCE

This much-neglected work is the oldest Coptic apocalypse from the Islamic period that has survived, and a rare contemporary witness to one of the first turning points in Coptic-Muslim relations. It is one of the earliest Coptic miaphysite literary sources to mention, and respond to, conversion of Copts to Islam and to contain information on Islamic doctrine, notably the denial that Christ was crucified.

MANUSCRIPTS

Arabic:

- MS Cairo, Coptic Museum – 97 (Hist. 470), fols 30v-33v (dated 1365; short version with considerable number of variants)
- MS Monastery of Macarius – 397 (Hag. 13), fols 203v-210v (dated 1550)
- MS Monastery of St Anthony – Hist. 142, pp. 64-82 (dated 1689)
- MS Cairo, Coptic Patriarchate – 654 (Hist. 59), fols 150v-156v (dated 1741)
- MS Al-Muḥarraḡ Monastery – 9.28, fols 28v-36v (dated 1752)
- MS BNF – Ar. 4888, fols 27v-34r (dated 1885)
- MS Al-Muḥarraḡ Monastery – 9.29, fols 80v-89r (19th c.)
- MS BNF – Ar. 4787, fols 32r-41r (19th c.)
- MS Monastery of St Anthony – Hist. 132, fols 31v-40r (dated 1911)
- Amélineau, *Monuments*, i, pp. 338-51 (edition to be treated as distinct witness due to the uncertainty about the identity of MSS used and the methodology)

Ethiopic:

See Colin, *Version éthiopienne*, i, pp. v-vi

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

- J. van Lent, *Coptic apocalyptic writings from the Islamic period*, Leiden, forthcoming (Diss. Leiden University) (critical English trans. from Arabic)
- G. Colin, *La version éthiopienne de la vie de Schenoudi*, 2 vols, Louvain, 1982 (CSCO 444-45), i, pp. 17-27; ii, pp. 11-18 (edition and French trans. from Ethiopic)

E. Amélineau, *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux IVe, Ve, VIe, et VIIe siècles*, 2 vols, Paris, 1888-95, i, pp. 338-51 (edition and French trans. from Arabic; does not conform to modern standards)

STUDIES

- J. van Lent, *Coptic apocalyptic writings*
- M.N. Swanson, 'Folly to the *ḥunafā*'. The Crucifixion in early Christian-Muslim controversy', in E. Grypeou, M. Swanson and D. Thomas (eds), *The encounter of Eastern Christianity with early Islam*, Leiden, 2006, 237-56, p. 239
- H. Suermann, 'Koptische arabische Apokalypsen', in R.Y. Ebied and H.G.B. Teule (eds), *Studies on the Christian Arabic heritage*, Leuven, 2004, 25-44, pp. 39-40
- S.J. Davis, *The early Coptic papacy. The Egyptian Church and its leadership in late Antiquity*, Cairo, 2004, p. 114
- H. Suermann, 'Koptische Texte zur arabischen Eroberung Ägyptens und der Umayyadenherrschaft', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 4 (2002) 167-86, p. 182
- J. van Lent, *Koptische apokalypsen uit de tijd na de Arabische verovering van Egypte*, Leiden, 2001, pp. 15-17
- Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 279-82
- D. Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt. The apocalypse of Elijah and early Egyptian Christianity*, Minneapolis MN, 1993, pp. 25-26, 225
- J.-M. Rosenstiehl, *L'apocalypse d'Élie*, Paris, 1972, pp. 40-42
- Graf, *GCAL* i, p. 463-64
- A.J. Butler, *The Arab conquest of Egypt and the last thirty years of the Roman domination*, Oxford, 1902, 1978², pp. 87-88, 188-89
- Amélineau, *Monuments*, i, pp. lii-lix
- Eutychii patriarchae Alexandrini annales*, ed. L. Cheikho, B. Carra de Vaux and H. Zayyat, 2 vols, Beirut, 1906-9 (CSCO 50-51)
- C.D.G. Müller, *Die Homilie über die Hochzeit zu Kana und weitere Schriften des Patriarchen Benjamin I. von Alexandrien*, Heidelberg, 1968